

OLYMPIA SHOW A GREAT SUCCESS

The exhibition of paintings and drawing by Lewis at the Fine Art Fair at Olympia from 1-6 March 2005 was by all accounts a resounding success. Not only were the reviews largely favourable, but the exhibits attracted a good deal of interest from casual visitors as well as from those with a more specialised interest.

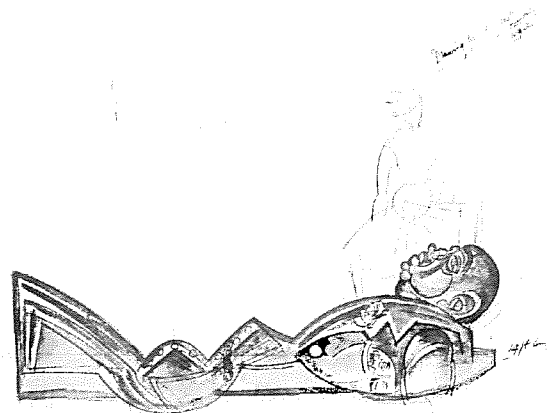
Organisers Angus Stewart and his colleague Matthew Hall must be unreservedly congratulated on their enterprise. The show aimed to explore the artist's development from student beginnings through the invention of Vorticism to the later portrait commissions and beyond. Its success was largely due to the high quality of the exhibits, many of which came from private collections, and for that reason often hidden from view. A balance was maintained between finished commissions in oil and studies in ink and pencil, and the overall impression conveyed by this coming together of the familiar and the unfamiliar was of an artist who must now be ranked among the most significant draughtsmen of the twentieth century, and certainly one of leading innovators in early modernism.

The Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust was instrumental in getting the exhibition under weigh and was an important lender of works. From the Trust's collection the following works were loaned: *Red Portrait*, 1937 (Michel P.76); *Curled-up dog*, Tut, 1932 (Michel 742); *Paris Taxi*, drawing for *Beyond this Limit*, 1935 (Michel 814); *The Meeting*, drawing for *Beyond this Limit*, 1935 (Michel 838); *Man's Head*, early 1940s (not in Michel); *Blast 1 and 2*; *The Enemy*, volumes 1, 2 and 3; and the special signed edition of *The Apes of God*, 1932.

An illustrated List of Exhibits, with an introduction by Angus Stewart, was available free at the exhibition. The Trust has been given a quantity of these 'catalogues' for distribution. Any member requiring a copy should send a stamped and addressed envelope (A4 together with a stamp of 79p) to Graham Lane at 2, Langton Way, London SE3 7TL.

LEWIS SOCIETY AGM SET FOR 29 JULY

The Annual General Meeting of the Wyndham Lewis Society will take place at 1800 (doors open 1730) on Friday 29 July at the usual venue, the offices of Bircham Dyson Bell, 50 Broadway, near St James Park Underground station. All are welcome. Members are encouraged to bring along a potential new recruit. There will be wine and food.



The Olympia and Courtauld exhibitions

What the critics said

compiled by Alan Munton

Olympia

The catalogue by **Angus Stewart** and **Matthew Hall** was published as 'Wyndham Lewis: An exhibition within the Fine Art, Design & Antiques Fair Olympia London 1-6 March 2005' in *Apollo* 516, February 2005. Includes 'Wyndham Lewis 1882-1957' by Angus Stewart, pp. 11-13, and 'List of Exhibits', pp. 14-15. Front cover illustration in colour: 'Female nude, crouching' (1919). Back cover illus. in colour: 'The Centauress' (1912).

Brian Sewell, 'Once more with feeling', *Evening Standard* (London), 1 March 2005, p. 43.

Wyndham Lewis has some claim to be the only intellectual painter in the whole history of British art, though I dare say that some working now – [Michael] Craig-Martin, for example – might argue their right to that small crown. Most of us know little about him for he has not been much exhibited. ... A very few London dealers have held his drawings and watercolours in stock over the past 30 years or so, steadily building interest in him, but one of those rocked the market in the early eighties when duped by an ingenious forger; one now has to be very wary of any example without a proveable provenance. With such invisibility it is not surprising that, if we know of him at all, it is as the man on the fringe of Bloomsbury who had a flaming row with Roger Fry. And hurrah I say for that – the row, not the invisibility, for he was the only man in the English-speaking world who saw through that old fraud and was prepared to say so. Much good it did him. For most of his life he was a lone prophet in the wilderness, not merely ignored but deliberately excluded by the art establishment – he became, as he said of David Bomberg in 1949, "one of the lost generation that really got lost".

He was, however, his own worst enemy...he broke a British rule, and the British, who do not care for men with more than one ability, solved their pigeon-holing problem by ignoring him. [...]

[H]is great portraits, of which T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound are fine examples, are civilised observations in which the mannerisms of his style take second place

to his responsibilities as a portrait painter for the future (Eliot wrote of his [him] that it was "one by which I am quite willing that posterity should know me"), but in lesser works the logic falls away and only style remains.

One may indeed argue that Lewis was always a man of style and often of very little more – a style so unmistakable that it has been easy to produce unsubtle forgeries. He tormented his subjects, twisted and turned them, stretched and distorted them, denied their nature, employed the exaggerations of the cinema and in all this painted commanding pictures that are monuments of deliberate style far more than they are clear illustrations of polemics and ideas. ... His pictures and drawings tell a frightening truth, not about their subjects but about the overweening confidence of Lewis as, willy-nilly, he applied the Wyndham Lewis style to subjects of such tragedy and menace as should make a strong man weep. But weep he does not, for with the passage of years, the paintings of Wyndham Lewis have become no more disturbing than the early cartoons of Walt Disney or the black-and-white classics of German cinema.

In Lewis I sense intellectual arrogance rather than integrity, even dishonesty of a kind, an inability to respond other than as a Pavlov dog responded – a painter who never evoked empathy, who could paint the horrors of war utterly detached from the human predicament of the trenches, who could draw a sensual woman and reduce her sensuality to that of a segmented orange, all in the interest of style.

Lewis is, for the moment, in the air. ... Visitors [to the Olympia exhibition] will make many connections with other painters, both British and European. Lewis was by far the most widely travelled and experienced painter of his generation of British artists, trained not only at the Slade, but at schools of equal stature in Paris and Munich, living in Europe for the years 1902-1908. He frequently betrayed a powerful interest in intellectual and revolutionary art movements. ... He was to some extent a Cubist, though he repudiated them as frauds; he embraced the Futurism of the Italians, but treated with derision their passion for speed and flight and noisy motor-cars; he admired the

"high metaphysical style" of Giorgio de Chirico and borrowed not only his ideas but those of his weak and silly brother, Alberto Savinio. He was evidently aware of the various factions of German Expressionism and was to reflect the cruel caricatural work of German artists in the early Twenties.

In abstraction the parallels between his work and that of the Russian Constructivists are uncanny but can perhaps be attributed to zeitgeist; his closest kinships are with Epstein's Rock Drill sculptures [*sic*] and Bomberg's abstract paintings – spiritual, intellectual and aesthetic kinships of extraordinary strength. At the other extreme he had an eye for the past and admired both Uccello's Rout [*sic*] in the National Gallery and the aggressively masculine figures by Signorelli in Orvieto Cathedral.

Some visitors will share my difficulties with Lewis, will find his emotional detachment chilling, his exaggerated menace ludicrous, his stylistic distortions empty and repetitive, his Blasting and his Vorticism unconvincing – we may even be grateful that he wasted himself on novels that now seem unreadable and political comments that were quite certainly naive and, as a consequence, painted much less than he might. And yet there is a grudging sense that he was possibly, just possibly, the one painter of the first half of the 20th century who could have brought Britain into the turbulent sweep of European culture then, had it not been for the power of his two worst enemies, Roger Fry and himself.

Tom Lubbock, 'The sensationalist', *Independent on Sunday*, ABC section, 13 February 2005, pp. 8-11. 10 illustrations, three in colour. On p.11, 'Where to See Wyndham Lewis's Work' lists ten UK galleries. Cover illustration of Lewis, based on an early photograph, by André Carrilho. Caption on ABC cover: 'Who's the Daddy? Tom Lubbock on the thoroughly dubious father of British Modernism: Wyndham Lewis.'

Discussion structured around Lewis's four 'big mistakes': (1). [Around 1920] So Lewis put his career as a public artist on hold. *That was his first big mistake.* (2) *That was his second big mistake:* he got too many people's backs up, made a point of it. (3) *His third big mistake was Hitler.* (4) *His fourth and last big mistake was making such odd, hybrid, unorthodox pictures.*

It's almost 50 years on. Lewis has his fan-base still, continually pushing the cause. But there was a lot of

Lewis, and the cause tends to get fragmented. [...] for many though, for me, it's the visual works, the paintings and drawings, that are the crux of the matter.

I can't remember where I first came across these pictures. I can remember the conversion experience – and of course if Lewis had been a more famous artist it probably wouldn't have happened like this. It was in the reference section of a public library. Our most intense encounters with art are often in reproduction... [B]ut afterwards, even seeing the real thing may not surpass that first piercing hit.

[He read Michel.] I had no idea images could be so glutting: the unimaginably gorgeous colours, the unfathomable imagery, the sharp and eliding textures, that electric line drawing. Unable to take out the large volume on my ticket, I felt obliged to remove it from the library surreptitiously, which was quite difficult. No one else was going to want it so badly. Still, that was my own line drawing undone. Irresistibly magnetised to Lewis's lines, but quite unequal to them, it had to stop.

It's only because of the art that I'm interested in the rest, in the writing, the manifestos, the criticism, the theorising, the satire, the whole controversial phenomenon, the personality and the life. It's only because of the art that I remotely care whether or not Lewis was a fascist. As for his art itself being visually or stylistically fascist, well I don't believe that. A hard, sharp-edged classicism is "fascist"? And a formless, oceanic, Wagnerian romanticism is "fascist" too, right? These *general* political diagnoses of style don't have much purchase.

And is it proper modern art? Is it art full stop? I don't know. I'd kind of like to have Lewis in the central pioneer pantheon of modernism. It's one way of getting him noticed. But frankly I wonder. In all his many activities, he never played it straight. May be he started off as an artist – and then turned into one of the great English illustrators.

The obvious comparison for Wyndham Lewis is another marginal, unplaceable creator, William Blake. Blake's images have that same elusive mix of archetypal vision and contemporary polemic, dense thought and blazing design. Blake's images took some time to emerge from their awkward, borderline, not-quite-art position. Now they're everywhere. (p. 12)

Mark Glazebrook, 'Blazing talent with a cold heart', *Daily Telegraph*, *Arts and Books* section, 26 February 2005, p. 9.

It's time to examine the sheer brilliance of his art and to celebrate his honourable place in the great tradition of revolt.

The short-lived show at the annual Fine Art, Design and Antiques Fair is a must for anyone seriously interested in modern British art. Lewis's early work continues to astonish. His later portraits of Pound and Edith Sitwell remain superb.

An excellent, small but well-illustrated introduction to Lewis's life and work as an artist, by Richard Humphreys (Tate Publishing, 2004) has also been published recently. It takes the reader through many of Lewis's beautifully executed, intriguing but often obscure images, putting them into the context of his stormy life – the stormy life of the man WH Auden once called, not without admiration, "the lonely old volcano of the Right".

Richard Humphreys, 'The enemy within', *Guardian*, *Review* section, 26 February 2005, p. [19].

Lewis believed the artist needed to be a philosopher. His drawings and paintings were a critique of both human behaviour and contemporary art. His philosophy at this stage comprised a strange satirical dualism that saw the body and the mind locked in a fatal antagonistic dance.

His work was by now [1914] semi-abstract, fiercely anti-futurist in its stark geometries, and concerned with shaping a new style appropriate to the contemporary world. [...] Hidden behind the sharp lines and angular blocks of colour were mysterious intimations of a world beyond appearances that indicate a continuing fascination with the metaphysical in Lewis's work. [...]

Behind all this noisy public performance, Lewis believed art was a "splendid and abstruse" form of magic. He subscribed to an essentially religious view – art "spoke only with God". He was eclectic in his theological interests and sceptical by nature, but his extreme dualism led him to assent to a notion of the immortality of the soul.

Lewis was a talented, energetic man, but his difficult inner life and aggressive interventions in cultural and

political debate left future generations wrestling with his various and brilliant legacy. Nearly 50 years after his death, we can now, perhaps, look more appreciatively at this strange and unearthly work without so much concern for all Lewis's contradictory, provocative pronouncements and battles.

Tom Rosenthal, 'Rise, fall and rise of an artist', *Spectator*, 26 February 2005, pp. 45-46. Illus: 'Café' (1910).

It will be interesting to see if next week's full-scale Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957) exhibition at Olympia will help, as previous Olympia shows have done, to cement the artist's reviving reputation. Certainly the timing is good in relation to last month's [Jan 31, 2005] scholarly symposium and the excellent recent exhibition concentrating on his works on paper, both at the Courtauld, where the growing number of his pictures controlled by the Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust are stored and available to researchers.

Angus Stewart, curator, together with Matthew Hall, of the Olympia exhibition, contribute a spirited re-assessment of Lewis to the catalogue, which has been printed by Apollo and has a preface by its editor suggesting that Lewis's reputation has been at least partly held back by his admiration for Hitler.

I'm not sure that this is entirely valid. No one fails to extol T.S. Eliot, whose anti-Semitism was manifest and, so far as I know, was neither withdrawn nor recanted. Pound, while recognised as conveniently dotty for his fascism, is still read and prescribed widely. Lewis, at least by the end of the 1930s, had seen the catastrophic error of his early enthusiasm for the Führer and recanted, as publicly as a writer can, by publishing no fewer than two characteristically pugnacious anti-Hitler books in 1939. It's also interesting to note that the painter and sculptor Michael Ayrton, himself a Jew – he was related to the Zangwill family – ... was, in the years of Lewis's decline into blindness, his amanuensis, and Ayrton could detect an anti-Semite at a hundred paces.

[I]t is one of the many ironies of Lewis's rise, fall and rise that he has left us the defining images of two right-wing geniuses of the modern movement. The great portrait of Ezra Pound in an armchair can be relished at Olympia, but, sadly, even the indefatigable Stewart could not winkle the oil paintings of Eliot out of Durban [...]

Two versions of Edith Sitwell and Eliot sketch on paper.] You can also see what is perhaps the finest of all Lewis's portraits, the so-called 'Red Portrait' of his wife Froanna, a classic combination of his severe angularity and his dramatic use of straight lines, all setting off, with an uncharacteristic sweetness, even tenderness, a luminous study of a beloved wife sitting peacefully in her armchair at home.

All this is a far cry from the convoluted violence of his Vorticist paintings, well represented here, notably by the almost sinister 'Sunset Among the Michelangelos' of 1912 and some of the dazzling 'Timon of Athens' graphic works. All in all this is a core selection in which one can readily see most of Lewis's quirks and tics, his predilection for immensely elongated ski-slope noses, his women's hair turned into helmets and, despite his finely voluptuous nude female paintings and drawings, some oddly androgynous naked figures.

Olympia gives us good examples of his instinctive grasp of design, as set out in his magazines such as *Blast* and *The Enemy* and his remarkable jackets for his books, so that you wonder how his many publishers could have been so dim as frequently to produce dull typographical jackets (p. 45) instead of using his own dramatic – and surely more saleable – compositions. My only cavil at an otherwise judicious and stimulating selection is the absence of any of his superb war paintings, whether from the first world war or the Spanish Civil War. These were even more powerful as polemic than his most provocative writings. [...] (p. 46)

Andrew Graham-Dixon, 'In the picture: Self-portrait (c. 1906; 18x16in) by Wyndham Lewis', *Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, 6 March 2005, p. 57. Illustrated by the work described.

The occasion for this week's picture is an outstanding exhibition of roughly a hundred works by the mercurial painter and writer Percy Wyndham Lewis – one of the highlights of this year's Fine Art, Design and Antiques Fair at Olympia. The picture in question is a rare early self-portrait, recently rediscovered and bought at a country auction by a Lewis aficionado. [...]

The self-portrait was painted in about 1906.... Clearly executed in some haste, it is not finished, possibly because Lewis could not afford the materials to complete it. He was short of money throughout his early years....

The portrait captures the truculent self-preoccupation of a prototypical angry young man....

'I had always to pass between cases full of more savage symbols on my way to the cinquecento,' he recalled, and there is perhaps something of the tribal mask about this self-portrait. It was painted seven years before Lewis founded the Vorticist movement, but seems already to portend his desire to break with conventional, academic styles of painting. His interest in supposedly 'primitive' means of expression may have deepened yet further in Paris, where Picasso, among others, had begun to collect and imitate African and Oceanic works of art.

There is also something almost Cubist about the way Lewis has painted his face as a series of interlocking planes – an angry geometry mirrored by his sullen expression. Only the mouth is full and sensual, though here too there is an implied rapacity. Like Francis Bacon after him, Lewis was fascinated by the mouth, and included descriptions of it often in his writings. Even in his mid twenties, Lewis had a highly developed world-weariness, and always seemed to have had an intimation that his lot in life was not to be entirely happy. This became more pronounced in his later years, when his eyes – so dark and brooding here – were damaged by an inoperable brain tumour. [Concludes with a longish quote from 'Sea-mists of the Winter'].

Courtauld

Caroline Bray, 'The Marriage of Line and Beauty', *The Beaver*, 10 November 2004, p. 18. (Weekly newspaper of the London School of Economics students' union.) *The Duc de Joyeux Sings* (1932-33) sees him satirising his good friend the writer James Joyce in a portrait of the writer as nobleman; clad ostentatiously in garter, gown, and carrying a scroll. The intricate geometric details on Joyce's garb adds a clownish feel to this distinguished figure as he glides elegantly across the page in a flow of self-righteous grace. [...]

[*Red Figures Carrying Babies and Visiting Graves*] was the last piece to be produced by an aging Wyndham who was slowly losing his sight. Yet the technique adopted is masterly and [the] detail minute. The babies sway helplessly in the arms of the soldiers and the vertical composition gives an air of strict regimented form to the piece. Though the figures no longer represent the realistic accuracy of his earlier

nudes their abstraction is entirely deliberate.

I would highly recommend this exhibition to all. It is a 5 minute walk from the LSE. ...make the most of this fabulous opportunity.

Tom Lubbock, 'Worlds without end', *Independent, Review section*, 26 October 2004, pp. 14-15. Illus.: 'Red Figures Carrying Babies and Visiting Graves' (1951) in colour; 'Women' (1921-22); 'Nude' (1938) in black and white.

[Recalls WL's blindness and abandonment of art criticism and 'necessarily' of art.] There is no case of a fully blind artist whose work is worth looking at, but Lewis came as near as any. [Discusses] a strange valedictory image called *Red Figures Carrying Babies and Visiting Graves*. A row of four, or perhaps five, indeterminate figures, multicoloured streaks, entirely vertical, with littler figures attached to them, alternate with equally vertical white gravestones. A meeting of the newborn and dead. War graves, one presumes, with the babies as war orphans. The figures themselves are on parade, and wearing a sort of military cap.

One can well believe it's a picture by someone whose central vision had gone, who had to peer at the world in fragments and through a magnifying glass. It doesn't look like the work of any other modern artist. It doesn't look much like other work by Lewis. But it has that hybrid quality that makes him such a maverick among modernists: a scene that's part-abstract, part-otherworldly vision, part-social comment.

This piece is the last in the Courtauld Institute of Art's exhibition of Lewis drawings. It covers, rather patchily, the whole of his late-starting, intermittent, but extraordinary pictorial career, from his earliest engagement with Parisian modernism. [...] Most of the show – from the Twenties, Thirties and Forties – divides between his tough, linear life drawings and what can only be called fantasies.

As a name, Lewis is still more or less heard of. ...He was the only plausible British artistic avant-gardist [...]

Lewis is a modern British artist who never captured the taste of a wide public, as Henry Moore and

Graham Sutherland once did, as Stanley Spencer and Francis Bacon still do. In a way, this seems strange. If there's one body of modern art in which the spirit of William Blake lives and is renewed, it's Lewis's, with the abstract force of its shapes, with its delicious colours, with its elusive textures, with its imaginative reach.

Lewis was not quite a proper modern artist. He was too much of a mixture. Though his abilities as a shape-maker, an abstract designer, are very strong, he doesn't believe in the self-sufficient image. Other things are always getting in. He can't help creating worlds and characters. [...]

He uses Cubism's methods to create a mythical/supernatural/sci-fi realm, a space in which bodies are half-solid and half-spectral, in which things interpenetrate and dimensions are unstable.

Or think of Fernand Léger's figures. They have a mechanical form to them, but they're not meant to be seen as robots. They're people infused with the spirit of the machine age, but they're not machine people. In Lewis's pictures, they are. The sharp, interlocked shapes in *Women* (1921-2) or *Three Sisters* (1927) are more than a formal variation on the human form: they're a new kind of organism, made of scoops of muscle and plates of armour. There are points in Lewis's work where, it seems, he only just fails to invent the Dalek.

Or again, there's the question of caricature. Modernism has its roots in caricature, in the radical and dramatic simplification of faces and bodies. But it does caricature without character. Lewis's drawings of James Joyce, however – *The Duc de Joyeux Sings* (1932) – is at once a very musical construction of clipped twirls and a satirical portrait of the writer.

Lewis socialises modernism. His figures, however abstracted, always seem to have a social life. The characters in some of the earliest drawings here – such as *Post Jazz* (1913) – do something that you'd find in Honoré Daumier but you'd never find in Gauguin: they meet in a social encounter, they react to each other's presence. [...] This preoccupation with the marks of fashion recurs even in the imaginative pictures. In the fantasy *Sea Cave* (1938), which one might take for an entirely spectral scene, the undulating shapes across the woman's legs are clearly stocking tops. That's a characteristic fusion.